

River flow proposal divides Democratic leaders

By KEVIN MURPHY
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WASHINGTON -- A plan to change the flow of the Missouri River to save three endangered species has hit new political snags that pit home state allegiance against party loyalty.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants more water released from a dam on a South Dakota reservoir in the spring to improve breeding prospects of two rare birds and a rare fish.

But last week the U.S. House passed a \$23.7 billion energy and water bill that would block the plan because it could cause spring flooding in downriver states, particularly in Missouri.

"It's imperative we slow this process down," said Rep. Sam Graves, a Tarkio, Mo., Republican whose northwest Missouri district borders the river. "That river is so important to so many folks."

Republican members of Congress from Missouri are on the same side of the issue as Democrats Karen McCarthy of Kansas City, Ike Skelton of Lexington and, importantly, House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt.

In the Senate, however, Democrat Tom Daschle of South Dakota is now majority leader, and he strongly favors the plan. Because more water would be released from the South Dakota reservoir in the spring, less water would be released in the summer, when the reservoir is used for recreation.

That would boost the water recreation industry in Daschle's home state. Missourians, however, worry that it would impede barge traffic downriver in the summer.

Last September the Republican-controlled Senate voted 52-45 to prevent changing the river flow, which some conservationists have sought for a decade. But President Bill Clinton vetoed the measure, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers set public hearings to move the plan forward this fall.

Now the House has stepped in to stop the plan, leaving it to the Democratic-controlled Senate to try to save it.

"We are getting close to the end, and we can't have elected officials run in now and try to dictate what happens out here," said Chad Smith of American Rivers, a conservation group.

Environmentalists are upset with Gephardt, normally on their side on high profile issues such as drilling for oil in Alaska.

"I watch him from afar talk about problems with environmental issues in the Bush

administration, and now we have this major one right in his back yard, and he is not there for us," Smith said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says higher water in the spring would help breed the endangered pallid sturgeon and would cleanse river sand bars of vegetation that serves as a hiding place for predators of two endangered birds -- the piping plover and interior least tern.

Not everyone agrees. The Missouri Department of Natural Resources has said that higher water could inundate bird-nesting sites.

Gephardt has consulted the Missouri agency and other conservation groups on improving habitats for the species in question without risk of flooding, said Kori Bernards, his press secretary.

"We think there are ways to compromise so both interests can be met," Bernards said.

As proposed, the corps of engineers would be able to release extra water from Gavins Point Dam in South Dakota at least once every three springs and would release less water in summer.

Although extra water would not be released if there was any perceived risk of downstream flooding, opponents say it is impossible to predict how much rain would fall in the 10 or so days it takes water to get from South Dakota to Missouri.

In addition to flooding, members of the Missouri delegation say the change in flow could hurt barge traffic. But Daschle has said protecting the \$7-million-a-year barge industry could come at the expense of an \$85 million recreation industry.

It remains to be seen what success Daschle will have in reversing the House action in the Senate. Last year's election has put 10 new faces in the Senate, which now has 50 Democrats, 49 Republicans and one independent.

Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri, the most vocal opponent of the proposed change last year, promised another fight this year.

"I will do whatever it takes to make sure Tom Daschle fails in his effort to flood out Missourians," Bond, a Republican, said this week. "All options are on the table."

Sen. Jean Carnahan, a Democrat, will work with Bond, spokesman Dan Leistikow said. Mel Carnahan, her husband, had opposed the change in river flow while governor last year.

"She welcomes the action in the House, and she will work vigorously to make sure the Senate follows suit," Leistikow said.

Carnahan will try to hold President Bush to what she sees as a promise he made on a campaign stop last fall to oppose changes in the river flow.

"I stand with Missouri farmers," Bush said last October. "I believe we can save

species without affecting the farmer's way of life."

Bush publicly has not indicated any change of heart.

"I talked to the president personally," Graves said. "He understands the issue and how important it is, not only to agriculture but to all the communities along the river."